What if there was growing evidence that an already-existing drug, taken daily, might dramatically reduce the risk of breast cancer?

Shouldn't that be more newsworthy than fund-raising walkathons done in the quixotic pursuit of a simple cure? More noteworthy than the latest lab test which classifies an environmental chemical as a rodent carcinogen?

U.S. and Canadian scientists, led by Harvard's Dr. Peter Goss, this week began recruiting thousands of women at high risk of breast cancer to participate in a study of what may well be just such a drug.

That "chemical prevention" of cancer has come so far will be a shock to most Americans -- but it is no surprise to those of us following this fast-paced research involving the use of drugs to both reduce the chances of breast cancer in healthy women and the risk of recurrence in those previously-treated.

For example, for a decade it has been apparent that Lilly's drug Evista, now approved only to prevent osteoporosis, has the side benefit of reducing breast cancer risk. Because that would be an "off-label use," Lilly isn't allowed to publicize the data on Evista's preventive properties -- but physicians are generally aware of this side benefit nonetheless.

The more recent news -- which triggered the new U.S./Canada study -- revolves around a group of drugs known as aromatase inhibitors, which dramatically reduce the levels of estrogen in postmenopausal women.

This class of drugs -- which includes Astra Zeneca's Arimidex and Pfizer's Aromasin -- has already been shown, as Dr. Goss puts it, to "profoundly" reduce the risk of recurrence in women who have already been diagnosed and treated for breast cancer -- and to do so with fewer side effects than an earlier drug, Tamoxifen. Arimidex decreases the chance of cancer developing in the other breast by almost 80 percent.

These results offer real hope for preventing breast cancer in healthy postmenopausal women at high risk of the disease. Indeed, Goss is on record as saying he hopes that this large study will show that Aromasin cuts the rate of breast cancer by nearly 70 percent.

The prospect of preventing tens of thousands of cases of breast cancer in the U.S. annually is stunning news. Why has this breakthrough received so little publicity?

A Google News and Web search finds almost no reporting on this. Instead, we read of the demands of consumer advocates to "prevent cancer" by banning even trace levels of environmental chemicals like DDT, PCBs, pthalates in cosmetics and more -- none of which have
any known relationship to breast-cancer causation.

Perhaps reporters think that "only bad news is news," while news of life-saving medical advances should end up on the cutting room floor.

Or perhaps this revolution -- breast cancer prevention through chemical compounds produced by drug companies -- is too sharply at odds with politically correct themes in the press these days: stories about chemicals causing cancer, rhetoric on why "natural" is better that synthetic -- and "exposes" about how greedy pharmaceutical companies are producing expensive, ineffective, risky drugs.

It seems the popular wisdom here is dead wrong. "Better living through chemistry," made possible by America's pharmaceutical industry, could soon make breast cancer a largely preventable disease.